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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000453

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: NEW CORRECTIONS MINISTER FACES MANY  
CHALLENGES

REF: TBILISI 255

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary: New Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance, Dimitri Shashkin told the Ambassador that he faces significant challenges regarding Georgia's current penal system. He said he will focus first on creating a probationary system for the country, noting that the current system is completely broken. He will look for western assistance in this area and believes he can quickly deliver measurable progress. Shashkin said inadequate facilities and prison health care will take longer to fix. The minister said he would have his first-year work plan ready by mid-March. Shashkin appealed to the USG for assistance on probation reforms, and in sharing Georgia's success on provision of legal aid to charged persons. As Minister, Shashkin will oversee Georgia's penitentiary, probation, and legal aid programs. He will also coordinate the GOG's democratic reforms (septel). End Summary.

12. (C) Comment: As the new head of a newly-created ministry (previously prison-related issues were covered by the Ministry of Justice), Shashkin has promptly set about addressing the significant tasks before him with determination and enthusiasm. Shashkin clearly sees himself as a communicator and reformer, with a primary role of sharing Georgia's progress with the West. Shashkin claimed President Saakashvili had given him a budget and free hand to run his ministry, saying "here is a ball and a field; how you play it is up to you." Given the serious problems in corrections, and as a GOG outsider, Shashkin will need time and authority to really implement reforms. End comment.

AMBASSADOR CALLS

13. (C) On March 5, the Ambassador paid a courtesy call on Shashkin, the new Minister of the recently renamed Ministry of Corrections and Legal Assistance (MCLA). Shashkin, who oversees Georgia's penitentiary, probation, and legal aid systems, joked that Minister of Internal Affairs Merabishvili was happy with the new ministry, because "he has given all the problems to me." The new minister appeared energetic, but realistic, in his empty new office, smelling of fresh paint. The Ambassador noted that many in Washington are carefully watching Georgia's new cabinet and democratic reforms in order to see if his appointment would result in real change, or is just "window dressing" to assuage Georgia's international friends. The Ambassador noted that he had shared this concern with others in the GOG. Shashkin replied that he believes the GOG must deliver the "real product" of democratic reforms and rule of law.

MINISTRY STRUCTURE

14. (C) Shashkin said his first-year work plan would be ready by mid-March. His ministry contains three departments, including penitentiary and probation, a training center, and legal aid. The MCLA is slated to have 100 staff members, but Shashkin believes he can run it effectively with 75. He is currently trying to hire qualified people, and is communicating with NGOs as well. He hopes to pick up some of the OSCE mission's staff when it closes. Shashkin wants to bring in as many "new, clean people" as possible. Shashkin said the ministry has its own general inspection and investigative units. Of four deputy minister positions, Shashkin was asked to keep only one specific person, David Jagua, a confidante of former prisons chief Bacho Akhalaia. Shashkin said this would not prevent him from running the ministry and implementing reforms his way, and he will appoint others to the remaining deputy minister slots. Shashkin told the Ambassador that he does not believe Akhalaia's notorious legacy will haunt the ministry.

#### FIRST THINGS FIRST

15. (C) Shashkin acknowledged that much international criticism exists regarding Georgia's current penal system. He said he will focus first on creating a probationary system for the country, because the current system is completely broken. He said there are 19,000 prisoners and 23,000 parolees in the country. Consequently, probation officers have over 700 cases at a time, and Shashkin said corruption/bribery in the monitoring system is rampant. Although he is moving money from his budget to address the probation issue, he will also look for western assistance in this area. Shashkin believes he can quickly deliver measurable progress. He hopes to use electronic monitoring bracelets, fingerprint signatures, and other technology to improve Georgia's capacity to track convicts released on

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probation. He wants to improve the ministry's country-wide communication and IT systems to full integration, modeled after the successful, USAID-sponsored Civil Registry Agency reform program.

#### OTHER PROBLEMS, NOT SO FAST

16. (C) Other problems will take much longer to solve, said Shashkin. Foremost among these is bad prison conditions. Given budget constraints, Shashkin said this will take years to fully correct. Shashkin said that the GOG is in the process of destroying several prisons, and he will open two new ones this year, markedly improving the situation. Prison healthcare is a more troubling problem, since the Aldagi Insurance Co. no longer sponsors treatment for prisoners and the Ministry of Health has refused to take responsibility for prisons. Shashkin said that he does not lack doctors or nurses, but rather equipment, psychologists, and rehabilitation specialists. He requested USG and international assistance in this area as well. Shashkin said that he plans to take responsibility for healthcare in-house for several years, until they can normalize a system that can be turned over to the Ministry of Health.

#### OTHER ISSUES; USG INVOLVEMENT

17. (C) The Ambassador asked Shashkin how his plans would affect the high percentage of people who are arrested and kept in pre-trial detention. Shashkin said those persons awaiting charges do not fall under his ministry, but rather the Ministry of Justice. He said "all" of the so-called thieves-in-law are held in prison, with Krik being the country's highest-security prison. The minister said he is also working with NGOs to determine appropriate visiting hours and regulations for prisoners. He said communication with NGOs are a priority for his ministry.

18. (C) The Ambassador said that the USG does not generally

provide direct aid for prisons, but that some of the probation ideas were worth consideration. Shashkin agreed that he needed assistance for probation, and not for prisons.

The minister also asked again for USG help in conveying Georgia's successes publicly to the broader western public. As an example, Shashkin noted that his legal aid department (formerly under the MOJ) had provided assistance in many cases where people were charged. Finally, he told the Ambassador he is tracking down where significant EU contributions -- dedicated to prison facility upgrades -- had gone since many prisons remained in bad shape.

TEFFT